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# Structure and meaning in strategic paradoxes: Exploring historical context in the emergence of agrifood standards

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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses a historical case study of the emergence of a set of agrifood standards to explore the historical development of strategic paradoxes. The paper demonstrates the value of historical methodologies of ‘zooming in and out’ for understanding the contexts in which paradoxical organisational structures develop over time. We explore the evolution of a significant strategic paradox, showing how changing relations between UK poultry producers and food retailers led to the emergence of a fundamental innovation in agrifood standards. The paper contributes to paradox theory by developing a historically rooted analysis of how context—which we theorise as simultaneously structurally determinative and cognitively malleable—can explain why organisational actors come to ‘live with’ a paradoxical dynamic equilibrium in which dialectical power relations remain embedded.

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‘I remember we had a visit from Max Justice, he didn’t fall in the drain [*where all the feathers and guts were going*] but he bloody well put his foot in it!’ [*laughter*] (Roberts, 2010).

## Introduction

Why would an anecdote about Sainsbury’s director of merchandise standing in chicken guts produce laughter many years after the incident? And why would similar stories circulate amongst retired poultry industry entrepreneurs decades later, a joke apparently just as funny in the retelling as in the original experience? For those not immediately familiar with the transformation of poultry production since World War II, the joke is not apparent. Much like the ‘great cat massacre’ explored by Robert Darnton (1985), the anecdote seems more disgusting than funny to an outside observer. But unravelling the meaning of the joke gives access to historical context—the systems of meaning in which we are all embedded—that can otherwise be shrouded from us by geographical, linguistic, and above all by temporal distance. The purpose of this paper is to use historians’ methodological approaches for understanding context to explain the broader social and organisational significance of an old joke that to outsiders makes little sense, but for insiders was a response to a paradoxical situation.

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Unpacking the grim humour embedded in this anecdote, we reveal, contributes to theoretical clarification and insight for the field of paradox studies. 'People make a lot of jokes about paradoxical conditions', note Jarzabkowski & Lê (2017, p. 433). Irony and sarcasm provide means for organisational actors who, despite recognising the limits to their power, must exercise agency in paradoxical situations (Berti & Simpson, 2021). Crucially, understanding a joke requires understanding its *context*—what is funny in one context may be deeply disturbing in another, if it makes sense at all (Mitchell et al., 2010).

Paradox studies treats *context* as foundational to its theoretical constructs. Paradoxes are situational and contingent, demanding methodological approaches that 'enable contextual richness' to understand why some organisational contexts are more prone to paradox than others (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 397). A firm with uncontested monopoly power, for instance, does not face the same tensions between competition and collaboration as do firms reliant on strategic alliances or networks (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Industries with complicated supply chains and widely acknowledged environmental sustainability problems such as electronics, for instance, are often rife with tensions among widely dispersed and asymmetrically powerful stakeholders with divergent needs and interests (Van der Byl et al., 2020; Zehendner et al., 2021). In paradox studies, the core theoretical construct of 'dynamic equilibrium' (Smith & Lewis, 2011) offers a set of testable propositions related to the question of how and why organisational actors come to accept or 'live with' unresolvable but organisationally productive tensions (Clegg et al., 2002). Yet most of the work that has contributed to existing paradox theory has been rooted in ethnographic and interview-based qualitative methods. Despite repeated calls for longitudinal analyses of the evolution of paradoxes (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010; Berti et al., 2021; Berti & Cunha, 2023; Fairhurst & Sheep, 2019), only a handful of studies have to date used longitudinal analysis to refine paradox theory (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Silva & Neves, 2022), limiting opportunities for understanding how strategic paradoxes develop over long periods of time.

We use a historical case study of the emergence of a particular set of agrifood standards to explore the evolution of a strategic paradox as both a structural system limiting inter-organisational arrangements and as a subjective context in which key organisational actors came to accept (begrudgingly) the limits to their agency. We show how, over time, the transformation of power relations within the food system constrained agency for certain organisational actors but not others. Agrifood standards provide a particularly rich empirical setting for exploring the evolution of paradox. By agrifood standards, we mean formalised agreements that set expectations for the quality, safety, and/or socio-ecological sustainability of an agricultural product or foodstuff (Busch, 2011; Freidberg, 2017; Henson & Hooker, 2001). Standards regulate wide swathes of the global economy, covering everything from computer networking protocols to shipping container sizes. They are imbued with pervasive tensions between, for instance, encouraging innovation vs. maintaining market stability, private vs. public enforcement, and local vs. global applicability (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2002; Russell et al., 2022; Russell & Vinsel, 2017; Yates & Murphy, 2019, 2022). Similar unresolvable tensions permeate agrifood standards, leading some scholars to argue that they fundamentally fail to satisfy the demands and needs of all stakeholders involved in agrifood systems (Meemken et al., 2021; Ponte & Daviron, 2005). Furthermore, because agrifood standards are written to define and measure practices and procedures within organisations, they are exemplars of the sort of 'measurement

apparatus' that Hahn & Knight (2021) stress as a means of making a latent (structural) paradox into a salient (cognitively meaningful) one.

Agrifood standards provide a fertile empirical setting to develop insights into historical methodologies for 'zooming in and out' to better understand the contexts in which strategic paradoxes occur and become salient (Berti et al., 2021; Cunha et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Putnam et al., 2016). This paper uses historically grounded analysis to explore context, elucidating the ways in which organisational activity can adapt to, and either thrive or simply survive, within a long-term paradoxical situation. In doing so we contribute to ongoing efforts to refine paradox theory to account for imbalances of power, bridging a longstanding dichotomy between equilibrium and dialectic approaches to paradox (Berti & Cunha, 2023; Berti & Simpson, 2021; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). This is because historical contextualisation, first, provides a means of determining which specific causes are most significant for explaining structural change over time, and second, it can reveal aspects of the processes by which paradoxes either do or do not arrive at a state of structural or subjective equilibrium, in an organisational setting that cannot be fully explained by the ethnographic and interview-based methods currently predominant in the field. Our research question therefore is to explore how historical methods for 'zooming in and out' can elucidate the process by which strategic paradoxes evolve and how they either become accepted as dynamic equilibria or persist as sources of dialectical conflict. We use the example of the relations between the poultry producers and dominant retailers in the UK and the creation of voluntary private standards. We show that as the industry evolved from one dynamic equilibrium to another, so retailer intrusion on production processes increased and producer autonomy decreased. Producers developed various coping strategies in recognition of their increasingly asymmetric relationship with retailers, including the telling and retelling of anecdotes – like the one above – which were almost meaningless to outsiders, but which were pregnant with humour to producers for whom the paradox of embracing their own powerlessness remained uncomfortably resonant over time.

## Paradox and context

Paradoxes are not mere tensions or conflicts, for they are contradictory yet also complementary; unlike tensions or conflicts, paradoxes cannot be resolved and thus last for long periods of time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Key strategic paradoxes identified for organisations include collaboration vs. competition, short-term profitability vs. long-term sustainability, and change vs. stability. The interdependent 'duality' of seemingly opposite concepts such as *stability* and *change* are in actual organisational practice so intertwined as to be inseparable: 'both contradictory and complementary' (Farjoun, 2010, p. 203).

Paradoxes can persist because they exhibit positive benefits to the overall organisation or system, even though the allocation of these benefits may be highly uneven. In the long-accepted 'dynamic equilibrium' model, paradoxes change over time, moving from one point of stability to another, where the allocation of benefits among the actors may change, but the organisation or system sees a net gain in overall benefits (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Conflicting demands among multiple stakeholders in a dynamic equilibrium paradox can create conditions for long-term sustainability, as organisational actors learn to navigate between opposing poles, accepting the irresolvability of the contradictions they face. Cognitive

acceptance of paradox simultaneously constrains individual agency—as the tensions at the root of the paradox never resolve—yet also enables individual organisational actors to exercise agency over processes that push systems towards ‘virtuous cycles’ (Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

A ‘permanent dialectics’ approach to paradox, by contrast, emphasises structural power imbalances more than individual agency (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Smith & Cunha, 2020; Weiser & Laamanen, 2022). Dialectical approaches to paradox highlight processes of disequilibrium and conflict, when stakeholders refuse to accept trade-offs that might lead to long-term sustainability (Clegg et al., 2002; Cunha et al., 2021). From this perspective, paradoxes are not only contingent but also fraught with unpredictability and surprise (Cunha & Clegg, 2018; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Putnam et al., 2016; Raisch et al., 2018). Despite the differences, both equilibrium and disequilibrium models agree that paradoxes are inherently unresolvable and are rooted in mutually constitutive contradictions. Both also acknowledge that the processes by which actors accept a paradox, and either move from one point of equilibrium to another or to a state of outright conflict, reveals much about power relations embedded in dynamic, complex business systems.

Far beyond simply identifying the significance of such paradoxes for organisations, research in the field of paradox studies has made important contributions to bringing context and contextualisation back to business and management studies. Smith & Lewis (2011, p. 397) have emphasised the need for ‘methodological strategies that can investigate tensions, enable contextual richness, and consider more cyclical dynamics.’ Putnam et al. (2016) urge paradox researchers to explore how ‘socio-historical conditions’ embed contradictions into organisational behaviour, including constitutive historical understandings in which organisational actors use their understanding of their own historical context to shape decision-making.

Despite awareness of the importance of contextualisation in paradox studies, however, existing theories of paradox are primarily rooted in methodological approaches that focus on processes unfolding over relatively short periods of time. Thus, key theoretical debates in the field, such as that between dynamic equilibrium and permanent dialectics models, are not well informed by the methodological approaches to long-term contextualisation that historians use. Recent work in entrepreneurship theory and historical organisational studies offers a way forward, demonstrating how rich contextualisation can help researchers understand difficult-to-explain phenomena (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016; Maclean et al., 2016; Wadhvani et al., 2020; Welter, 2011; Welter et al., 2019; Zahra & Wright, 2011). Historians understand that context ‘matters.’ But it is also clear that similar historical contexts do not always produce the same organisational or strategic outcomes (Godley & Hamilton, 2020; Silva and Neves, 2022). Historical context should therefore be understood as simultaneously structurally determinative and subjectively malleable (Wadhvani et al., 2020). Methodologically, history offers a means for exploring context that contributes to ongoing efforts to resolve a longstanding debate within paradox studies over whether paradoxes are material structures or social constructions, or both (Hahn & Knight, 2021).

## Historical methods for contextualizing paradox

Colloquial usages of ‘paradox’ tend to emphasise contradictions, yet the fundamental insight in paradox studies is to understand such oppositions as simultaneously complementary and

interrelated. This is methodologically as well as conceptually challenging, requiring modes of analysis that can attend to multiple levels of social and organisational phenomena. Advocating a technique of 'zooming in and out', drawing on Nicolini (2009a, 2009b), Jarzabkowski et al. (2019) offer an approach that simultaneously acknowledges the 'detail of specific practices' in unique locations in space and time while also considering how such specific practices 'shape, and are shaped by, their broader social context' (p. 123). Zooming in and out requires the researcher to pay careful attention to specific, local processes—'foregrounding' some while 'bracketing' others (Nicolini, 2009a)—while iteratively stepping outside those specifics to consider how other processes, removed in space and time from those being foregrounded, are in dynamic interaction. The method enables understanding of contradictory yet interrelated, system-wide phenomena, while helping to explain why such paradoxes persist over time (Berti et al., 2021; Cunha et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). 'Zooming in and zooming out' is rooted in ethnography, posing challenges for historians. Unlike ethnographers, historians cannot position themselves amidst the processes they analyse; historians must rely on texts to perceive contexts. In this regard, 'zooming out', from a historian's perspective, involves something substantively different than the ethnographer's approach. An ethnographer 'zooming out' seeks to follow 'dependencies and references', tracking people, artefacts, and processes through their networks of interactions (Nicolini, 2009a, p. 1407). Historians likewise follow connections when perusing archival sources. But historical connections between texts are often fragmentary, or written in coded language, or written using words and concepts for which the meanings have changed between the time of writing and the present. As Lowenthal (1985) has aptly noted, 'the past is a foreign country.'

Like ethnographers, historians seek to embed themselves in the context of the past to expose the 'conditions created by an activity which make that activity meaningful' (Nicolini, 2009b, p. 127). Yet for historians there is an epistemological quandary of contextualisation, highlighted by the work of historical philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who proposed that every human action or thought only gained meaning 'through its relationship to the totality of its epoch or age' (Mitrović, 2015, p. 312; cf. Dilthey, 2002). Radical contextualism—the view that context determines all possible social meanings—would prevent us in the present from fully understanding a concept or event (or joke) from the past unless we share exactly the same worldview. Yet if all contexts are shared across time, contextualisation cannot explain change over time (Lawson, 2008; Mitrović, 2015).

Historians typically address this quandary by 'zooming in and out' via reading a large volume of primary and secondary sources, considering the changing nature of language and the interplay between structure and agency in order to make sense of any given text (Decker, 2013; Lipartito, 2014; Rowlinson, 2004). Rather than use computer-aided text-mining to perform 'distant reading' by breaking up huge volumes of text into discrete units (Moretti, 2013), most historians approach their reading in an analog fashion, much as the optical zoom on a camera lens allows a photographer to focus and refocus at differing distance from a subject with no absolute division at any point between the close and the distant perspective (Glaubitz et al., 2018; Jockers, 2013). This analog approach to 'zooming in and out' has been highlighted by Gaddis (2002) as a core capacity of the methodologically sophisticated historian. There is a metonymic function of such scale-shifting; the part can be used to take the place of the whole, making the more easily described particular instance stand in for the larger and more complicated general structure or trend. But beyond this, the historian's capacity for zooming in and out in an analog fashion—that is,

nearly simultaneously holding the object of study in close focus and also approaching from more distant perspectives—can provide ‘a new angle of vision into the past’ (Gaddis, 2002, p. 26).

Contextualisation is necessary for understanding paradoxes, for as paradox scholars have noted, all paradoxes are produced in contexts, and the differences between those contexts can help make sense of the otherwise nearly incomprehensible (Bednarek et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Smith & Lewis, 2011). History is methodologically equipped to deal with contingency and variations in context, perhaps better than any other discipline (Hoffer, 2008; Tilly & Goodin, 2006). What remains to be explored is how such historical methods for contextualisation can contribute to paradox studies. Two opportunities in particular present themselves.

First, careful contextualisation can expose ‘specific causes that provide historical explanation’ (Mitrović, 2015, p. 331). Rather than seek to understand the ‘totality’ of context as Dilthey would have it, historians use their toolkit to understand what was *most* significant about any given context. When pursued rigorously, historical methods for contextualisation via analog zooming in and out can produce a reliable and defensible explanation for why any specific event or text is especially significant (or not) in explaining broader social, economic, and political transformations over time.

Second, the temporal distancing enabled by historical methods of zooming out can reveal aspects of organisational paradox that are not accessible via ethnographic or interview-based methods. The processes by which organisational actors transition to acceptance of a state of paradoxical equilibrium, for instance, may only reveal themselves when exposed to long-term analysis. The ‘dynamic equilibrium’ of paradox might come about very slowly and imperceptibly, both to the organisational actors embedded in it and for those researchers exploring it. Or, alternatively, historical methods may reveal the circumstances under which a ‘permanent dialectic’, rather than equilibrium, becomes embedded in a complex system rife with tensions.

In the sections that follow, we offer two forms of historical contextualisation. First is a brief periodisation of the historical emergence of voluntary agrifood standards. This section draws upon a voluminous reading of hundreds of primary and secondary sources, the vast majority of which cannot be cited due to space limitations, with the aim of producing a compact explanation of the *most significant* features of voluntary agrifood standards. Rather than try to summarise an entire ‘worldview’, we present synecdoches to stand in for a wider whole, so that the more close-grained analysis that follows ‘makes sense’ to readers who have not embedded themselves as thoroughly in the subject as we have. As Berti et al. (2021, p. 119) suggest, zooming out prior to zooming in can be essential for revealing the large-scale contexts of grand challenges. Second, we present a case study that zooms in to a set of specific circumstances in the UK poultry sector in the 1960s and 1970s that resulted in a long-term organisational paradox and was a catalyst for the creation of one very significant set of voluntary agrifood standards. This section is likewise built upon voluminous reading of many texts of different kinds, from multiple perspectives. The case study zooms in on a surprising and unexpected outcome of the design and adoption of an agrifood standard in the poultry industry. It is not immediately obvious why key actors such as poultry producers accepted the new standards. In the conclusion we then zoom out, circling back to the broader context of voluntary agrifood standards as paradoxes to make sense of the puzzle

highlighted enigmatically by the quotation in our epigraph. In so doing, we demonstrate the promise of historical contextualisation for contributing to paradox studies.

## The paradoxes of voluntary agrifood standards

‘Zooming out’ on the broad political and economic context of food and agricultural history over the past 150 years enables a compact periodisation of three phases of agrifood standards, their motivations, and their resultant paradoxes (see Table 1). Quality standards were first introduced to mass markets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily to smooth market transactions. A standard such as ‘USDA prime beef’ reduced market uncertainties for both producers and consumers of agricultural products, minimising the costs of contesting the pricing of specific products or having to seek external information to validate a good’s quality (Cohen, 2020; Frohlich, 2022; Stanziani, 2012). Groundbreaking and transformative national legislation, such as the 1899 Food and Drugs Act in the UK and the 1906 Meat Inspection Act in the US, provided government backing and (in some instances) inspection services to mass-market food processors, who voluntarily adopted standards to assure consumers that foods were not adulterated or misrepresented. This arrangement produced a central, persistent paradox: both consumers and producers benefitted from smoother market transactions, but both consumers and producers also acknowledged the loss of variety such uniformity entailed (Freidberg, 2009; Frohlich, 2022). Accepting this dynamic equilibrium was premised on multiple stakeholders accepting the fact that, despite being framed in terms of consumer interests, early quality standards were, in the

**Table 1.** Periodizing agrifood standards.

Period	Characteristics	Examples	Motivations	Persistent paradox
Mass Market Quality Standards (1880s-1930s)	Voluntary grading with state backing / inspection	1899 Food and Drugs Act (UK) 1906 Meat Inspection Act (USA) 1916 Warehouse Act (USA)	Anti-adulteration, buyer trust in ‘purity’ in era of mass-produced, branded foods; lowered transaction costs in large-scale food marketplace	Uniformity vs. variety in food quality
Government Safety and Identity Standards (1930s-1970s)	Government mandated standards of identity, voluntary business adoption of inspections	1938 Pure Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (USA) 1957 Poultry Products Inspection Act (USA) 1963 Codex Alimentarius (UN FAO; voluntary, but nations can legislate mandates)	Organised consumer movements demand government intervention for consumer clarity, safety, health, animal welfare; stabilising/ expanding international markets	Trust vs. mistrust in government intervention
Voluntary Sustainability Standards (1980s-Present)	Multinational third-party auditing/ certification schemes, risk-based coregulation	1997 EurepGAP / 2007 GlobalGAP 2002 SAIPlatform 1987 Rainforest Alliance 2006 Field to Market	Multinational corporation reputational risk management, including food safety but also labour/ smallholder exploitation and environmental harms	Access to vs. closure of markets

words of a consumer advocate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 'first worked out from the producers' end of the marketing process' (Sherman, 1930).

A transformative inflection point came in the 1930s, when organised consumer movements turned to national governments to insist upon mandatory food safety standards. Whereas earlier voluntary standards had focused primarily on problems of adulteration and fraud, by the 1930s consumers were increasingly aware of the health risks of chemical additives. The U.S. Pure Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938, for instance, empowered government mandatory food identity standards to prevent consumer harm and confusion. Consumer advocates engaged in this new dynamic equilibrium with continued mistrust. For instance, when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration introduced a standard of identity for peanut butter in 1959, more than a decade of contestation ensued before the standard was finalised. Consumer groups demanded that peanut butter should contain primarily peanuts, while industry insisted that peanut butter definitionally required emulsifiers and stabilisers (Boyce, 2016). Similarly, the US Poultry Products Inspection Act of 1957, or the Food and Agriculture Organisation's creation of the Codex Alimentarius in 1963, emerged in response to organised consumer demands for government-backed protection from presumed food corporation malfeasance. The implementation of these publicly developed standards, however, generally protected private interests foremost, primarily in expanding industry access to international markets (Halabi & Lin, 2017; Merck, 2020). A central paradox thus defined this period, as both consumers and businesses sought to use government power to redefine the boundaries of trust in a food marketplace increasingly reliant on chemical additives, industrial animal rearing, and international sales. As detailed more thoroughly below in our case study of UK poultry, continued mistrust in government capacity for ensuring health and safety, expressed by both consumers and businesses, eventually led to a new dynamic equilibrium emerging in the 1980s that put private sector governance more prominently in the driver's seat.

Voluntary sustainability standards—as distinct from legislative standards such as national meat inspection or public health laws—emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Multinational food corporations, operating in public-private hybrid governance institutions involving multiple stakeholders, have since that time positioned third-party certification as more effective than government mandates. As we demonstrate in the case study below, these voluntary sustainability standards have strong roots in the animal welfare and consumer movements of the 1960s and 1970s. They have, however, rapidly proliferated since the early 1990s in response to a set of social and ecological crises in the globalised food supply chain that posed reputational risks to multinational agribusiness firms (Bennett, 2012; Doherty et al., 2013; Fuchs et al., 2009). Widely reported crises of trust in agrifood systems—including 'mad cow' in the UK, *E. coli* outbreaks in US fast food, and reports of rainforest devastation and exploited agricultural labour in the Global South—spurred firms to collaboratively develop new risk-mitigating standards. Complex multistakeholder initiatives (MSIs) such as GlobalGAP, SAI Platform, or Rainforest Alliance simultaneously seek to combine market and social goals in agrifood systems on a global scale. The grand challenges addressed include access to safe and nutritious food, alleviation of rural poverty and modern slavery, protection of biodiversity, and mitigation of climate change (among others).

The strategic consequence of the currently dominant dynamic equilibrium in agrifood standards is a balancing act between the promise of transformative change on a grand scale and persistent constraints on the ability of any individual stakeholder group to achieve

desired outcomes. The global adoption of voluntary agrifood standards simultaneously promises a safer, more just, and more sustainable food system—and yet is routinely criticised by all participants as failing to deliver on those promises (Freidberg, 2017; Fuchs et al., 2011; Meemken et al., 2021). The paradoxical nature of agrifood standards is developed further in the following case study of the UK poultry's shifting uses of antibiotics. The case illustrates how voluntary sustainability standards emerged in the UK foods sector, where leading UK food retailers pre-empted government safety standards that were developing in response to a crisis of consumer confidence in antibiotic use among poultry producers. This innovation in the design and implementation of standards then laid the foundation for EurepGAP (the precursor to GlobalGAP). By contrast with the 'zooming out' of the previous section, in the following case study we 'zoom in' to more closely consider why some organisational actors such as the poultry producers 'voluntarily' accepted a new dynamic equilibrium in which they were increasingly disadvantaged relative to the dominant food retailers.

### Case study: antibiotics in UK poultry production

One of the most important sets of food standards today is GlobalGAP, which governs much of what the world eats. This emerged from its equivalent Europe-wide set of standards, called EurepGAP (Baghasa, 2008; GlobalGAP, n. d.) and was driven by the large European food retailers, and, specifically, by the largest UK-based supermarkets, notably Sainsbury's, Tesco and Marks and Spencer in the 1980s and 1990s (Busch, 2011). EurepGAP emerged from large-scale food retailers' desire to translate consumer interests into supplier standards, restraining the choices made by food growers, processors, and distributors through 'voluntary' submission to private certification programs (Fuchs et al., 2011; GlobalGAP, n.d.). But in promoting some consumer requirements for food safety, EurepGAP—and after 2007, GlobalGAP—dramatically relegated other consumer requirements in importance. Consumer *choice*, for example, was relegated in importance to a very significant degree. The architects of food standards, by definition, privilege some aspects of the food supply chain over others. One paradox of such standards is that while they may promote consumer trust in some aspects of ever more complex food chains, there is a real possibility that they can undermine consumer trust in other aspects of supply (Frohlich, 2022; Kjærnes et al., 2007).

This is well illustrated by an example that lies at the heart of the retailer-led creation of private food standards in the UK, the example which fundamentally shaped UK supermarkets' approaches to supply chain management in the 1960s and 1970s, and so which therefore provided the template for the formal creation of EurepGAP in 1997. This was the creation of voluntary standards among suppliers of poultry meat to Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury's, driven by a retailer-led response to a crisis in consumer confidence in the 1960s. As will become clear from the case study, the retailers were entirely responsible for the innovation of voluntary private standards and their diffusion among poultry meat suppliers, although their adoption was far from being purely voluntary. The retailers were the dominant actors within the food chain with significant powers of coercion.

The literature on the historical emergence of the UK poultry industry has correctly identified the structural changes introduced by leading supermarket retailers (Godley, 2014; Godley & Williams, 2009a, 2009b; Tessari & Godley, 2014), but has only begun to explore how less-powerful actors experienced the meaning of changing power relations (Godley & Hamilton, 2020). This case study is based on interview transcripts with the founders or former

senior managers of nine of the largest and most important poultry producers in the UK between 1955 and 1980, collectively responsible for the majority of market share and the entirety of significant innovations. These interviewees provide the most authoritative and comprehensive account of the relationships between the producers and the dominant retailers in this key period of transition. Originally conducted under the auspices of an ESRC-funded research project, the interviews were subject to post-award evaluation. Given that the total number of interviews was seven, manual coding and analysis of themes was deemed to be most suitable. After technological change in production techniques, supermarket relations was the next most common theme among all interviewees.<sup>1</sup>

The poultry industry originated in the UK in the mid-1950s. There were a handful of pioneer enthusiasts, but it was only after Sainsbury's Director of Merchandise, Max Justice, visited the U.S. with Britain's leading evangelist for broiler chickens, Geoffrey Sykes, in 1955 or early 1956 that the industry took off (Sykes, 1963). They realised that broiler chickens represented an 'incredible opportunity' in the UK (Maunder, 2005), but it required a retailer to organise suppliers. Justice summoned the representatives of five poultry processing companies in 1956 and told them how he wanted them to organise supplies of broiler chickens in their respective regions. 'And we just sat there and took this. This was marching orders. We were basically told, "Go home and organise it"' (Maunder, 2005).

Justice was the 'prime mover' of the poultry business, ensuring Sainsbury's would be the lead retailer at least until the mid-1960s (Roberts, 2010). But it is important to note that initially the industry was producing New York dressed poultry, meaning that the chicken's guts were left in the bird after slaughter. This permitted product longevity, but at the cost of needing more shop space and time for evisceration at the point-of-sale. Sainsbury's was simultaneously converting its shop format to self-service, limiting space for in-house poulterers to gut and prepare the birds. Self-service supermarketering thus required evisceration to take place at the point of slaughter, but this increased risks of bacterial contamination. This in turn mandated extensive investment in refrigeration, but emerging supermarkets did not yet have refrigeration capacity to distribute chilled chicken safely. For the chicken business to continue, it had to move to frozen chicken, which was largely achieved by 1960 (Godley, 2014; Roberts, 2010).

This initial transformation in the UK poultry industry demanded that producers scale up their processing factories and invest in expensive cold storage. During the late 1950s to mid-1960s Sainsbury's was the leading retailer of frozen chicken, and so exerted considerable influence over price. Prices for chickens from Buxted, the largest producers of frozen poultry in the UK, were set at 'what Max Justice said' (Cookson, 2011). Whenever stocks in stores were building too high, Justice would negotiate price cuts that the producers felt powerless to deny. As one interviewee recollected, price discussions ended with him saying, 'Max, I'm in your hands!' (Roberts, 2010).

At the same time, Sainsbury's (followed by others) were developing own-branded foods (Burch & Lawrence, 2007). This gave them more control over what was sold in their outlets, and so more scope for increased profits. But it also meant that retailers took responsibility for promoting consumer trust in those products, including chicken, that the supermarkets had not produced but which were increasingly sold under their own brand (Godley & Williams, 2009a, 2009b). If there was a perceived risk to consumer trust in frozen chicken, then it was the large UK supermarkets that had the strongest incentive to act.

The event that transformed retailer-supplier relations was a crisis of confidence in the UK chicken industry that suddenly emerged in the mid-1960s. Concerns about animal welfare, triggered by the publication of Ruth Harrison's *Animal Machines* (1964), led to an intense public focus on the moral implications of indoor rearing of livestock, especially chickens (Harrison, 1964; Kirchhelle, 2021; Sayer, 2013). The controversy generated related investigations, notably Elspeth Huxley's (1967) *Brave New Victuals*, which highlighted the role played by antibiotic growth promoters (AGPs) in intensive rearing, and to a Parliamentary enquiry on livestock welfare chaired by Roger Brambell in 1965. The controversy continued and prompted the formation of the Swann Parliamentary Committee in 1969, which led to the UK becoming the first country in the world to ban AGPs in 1971 (Bud, 2007; Kirchhelle, 2018, 2020).

Animal welfare concerns were largely distinct from human health risks posed by frozen chicken, but the two could easily combine in consumers' minds to produce a crisis of trust in mass-retailed poultry. For those leading supermarket retailers, including Sainsbury's, with the greatest sunk costs and who were committed to retailing these products under their own-brands, these factors drove these firms to develop the first voluntary private standards to govern supply chains in the UK poultry sector (Maunder, 2005). Sainsbury's in particular demanded their suppliers remove antibiotics from their poultry feed. 'It was emphatic. "You must do this!"' (Maunder, 2005). Usage of antibiotics was extensive, however, not just as growth promoters but also to combat bacterial reproduction after evisceration. Sainsburys introduced 'very clear-cut specifications' for processors to implement unprecedented hygiene practices. 'They led ahead of legislation' (Maunder, 2010). Producers complied, recognising that Sainsbury's 'has the ultimate weapon, removing our business. A prospect which horrified us!' (Maunder, 2010). This was no abstract concern. John Maunder remembered 'very clearly being told [by a Sainsbury Director], 'If you mess up on this, it isn't just you that goes down, it is going to severely damage our profitability' (Maunder, 2005).

The supermarkets' actions might suggest they served as champions of consumer interests, providing enlightened leadership to reduce poultry farmers' reliance on antibiotics. But such a view does not explain why antibiotic consumption among UK poultry producers subsequently failed to decline (Bud, 2007; Corley & Godley, 2011; Kirchhelle, 2018, 2020). Although AGPs in UK poultry production were phased out by retailer-led voluntary standards, livestock producers simply switched from using antibiotics as growth promoters to using antibiotics as medicines. This might perhaps be interpreted as dominant retailers cynically manipulating food regulations. But what is really surprising, given the degree of consumer controversy surrounding livestock antibiotic consumption in the 1960s and very early 1970s, is that even though data on antibiotic use among livestock was and remains widely available, there has been no repetition of the controversy since. There have been many other crises in UK consumer confidence in food since 1971—including 'mad cow' in the 1990s and the 'horsemeat scandal' of the 2010s—but not one centred on antibiotic use. Indeed, chicken consumption in the UK has continued to increase since 1970, with over half of all meat consumed in the UK now poultry meat, and almost all of this sold through the large supermarket retailers. The implementation of a set of voluntary standards regarding food safety, quality, and sustainability produced paradoxical results. For growers and retailers, the standards minimised consumer mistrust, reducing market uncertainties and enabling the continued expansion of a profitable

industrial model of animal rearing. For consumers, the standards reduced human health risks from microorganisms and led to further reductions in the price of an increasingly popular meat but did not fundamentally satisfy the original consumer interest in promoting animal welfare.

The next major retailer intrusion into producer processes came with the transition from frozen to fresh, chilled chicken after 1970. The key organisation here was Marks and Spencer, which had mostly stayed aloof from frozen chicken in the 1960s, with the view that this was a low-quality food product. They initially experimented with three selected producers to develop fresh, chilled chicken: Marshalls (just outside Edinburgh), Sun Valley (Hereford), and Robert Mayhew (Sussex). Frozen chicken was wet because the post-evisceration cooling process involved immersion in iced water in a spin chiller. To produce a palatable fresh chicken required a new approach to refrigeration and bacteriological control among producers (Gilliat, 2011; Mayhew, 2010; Roberts, 2010). In the absence of chemicals this meant much greater bacteriological control through increased hygiene throughout the supply chain. Once again producers had to reconfigure factories to respond to Marks and Spencer's as well as Sainsbury's demands for higher hygiene standards (Maunder, 2005; Roberts, 2010).

Marks and Spencer's stringent voluntary standards were more demanding. Policing compliance, Dr Nathan Goldenberg and Peel Holroyd continually inspected suppliers (Goldenberg, 1989; Telford et al., 1986). It was 'a step change in responsibilities' (Maunder, 2022). Sainsbury's inspectors arrived 'unannounced' and typically monthly (Maunder, 2022). 'We had M&S people with us all the time' (Roberts, 2010; cf. Gilliat, 2011; Wiley, 2011).

## Discussion

The case study of UK poultry and antibiotics illustrates the benefit of zooming in and zooming out for exploring paradox in historical context. The role played by actors, and the prominence of the key actors' voices elicited through the oral history process, enables historians to 'zoom in' to vicariously understand their embodied, experienced, proximal perception of the localised, specific historic context. Even though the interviews upon which the case study is based were held forty or more years after the events in question, the recollection by the actors of these events was keen. Zooming in on the experiences and memories of organisational actors, while also zooming out to the broader political and economic context of the changes in agrifood standards over the course of the twentieth century, permits better understanding of how the actors within the food chain network accepted the paradoxical nature of the new voluntary standards and so how the system moved from one state of dynamic equilibrium to the next.

By some time before the end of the 1970s, producers understood that the benefits of sustained business growth came at the cost of having to conform to retailer-led voluntary standards. Each successive transition from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s – from pre-eviscerated to frozen, from liberal usage of antibiotics to their partial removal, and from frozen to chilled chicken – led to a change in the balance of power between producers and retailers. As several of the quotes above indicate, producers felt their relative inferiority keenly. They felt they had no choice but to accept new terms, which may have seen financial advantage, but which eroded their autonomy step-by-step.

The main question that emerges from the case study is: under what conditions did the poultry producers accept the voluntary standards that these retailers had imposed upon

them? How much agency did they exhibit? Why did they not simply switch to other buyers with less demanding quality assurance procedures? Given the relationship between the creation of this specific innovation in food standards and how it formed the template for the subsequent EurepGAP and GlobalGAP standards, the nature of power relationships within the supply chain is a crucially important contextual consideration for explaining how the paradox was accepted by the poultry producers. This in turn then helps with our ability to understand the broader adoption of EurepGap and GlobalGAP.

Key to the historical method of contextualisation is a focus on the 'specific causes that provide historical explanation' (Mitrović, 2015). The specific causes of the acceptance of the paradox embodied in the new voluntary standards by the poultry producers could have come from one of two mechanisms. First, the supply chain network may have revolved around a highly authoritarian approach, where the power of these retailers was able to force the less powerful poultry producers to accept this new equilibrium. Second, some less authoritarian mechanism may have generated legitimacy for the outcome among the less powerful actors, even though as their autonomy began to erode they realised that their best interests were far from being prioritised in these new voluntary standards.

Zooming in then allows us to focus on the chicken 'drain' anecdote in our epigraph.

Dai Roberts, one of the poultry suppliers to Sainsbury's, laughed when he recalled how the Director of Merchandise at Sainsbury's suffered an indignity on a visit to the firm's processing station:

I remember we had a visit from Max Justice, he didn't fall in the drain [where all the feathers and guts were going] but he bloody well put his foot in it! (Roberts, 2010).

The record from the transcript doesn't do justice to the emotional force given to the story by the amount of laughter it prompted in the interviewee, which is much more obvious from the audio recording, and remains very memorable to the interviewers. The level of mirth at this particular episode needs to be deconstructed. In other contexts, laughing about someone's unfortunate, but relatively trivial, accident would be judged highly inappropriate (Mitchell et al., 2010). A mother would not typically laugh to her friends at her toddler getting their shoes dirty. A lover would more likely show concern. But the poultry producer interviewee laughed uncontrollably when recounting this episode, even though it was some forty years after the event. The embarrassment represented a minor and insignificant triumph against an otherwise dominant partner in these voluntary agreements.

One interpretation of this response is to identify in the context the unequal power relations between the two men, and that therefore the joke encapsulated how the all-powerful actor was humiliated by stepping into the chicken guts and feathers. Zooming out from this interpretation of the anecdote then would encourage the view that so dominant were the powerful retailers in this supply chain that the source of legitimacy that brought the less powerful actors to accept the new standards was simply authoritarianism. This would indicate a strategic paradox characterised by conflict and tension, a permanent dialectic—making the joke into a rhetorical use of sarcasm seeking 'micro-emancipation' through detachment (Berti & Simpson, 2021, p. 264).

However, cross-referencing the anecdote with other interviewees—zooming out by gaining broader textual perspective and temporal distancing—led to the realisation that Dai Roberts had told the joke many times (Maunder, 2005, 2022). This permits us to interrogate

the original source in a different way, to project a new angle of insight into the past (Gaddis, 2002). This suggests that the joke was part of a genre, widely known among peer poultry producers, continually reproduced in various forms to punctuate the contextual significance of asymmetric power relations with a grim but highly *meaningful* statement of acceptance of that systemic shift. Marks and Spencer's Peel Holroyd was mocked behind his back (Roberts, 2010). Two interviewees recalled how they would feign agreement in the presence of Marks and Spencer's inspectors, only to delight in (perhaps only temporarily) ignoring their recommendations later (Gilliat, 2011; Roberts, 2010). These anecdotes circulated among producers (Maunder, 2022) because they carried a currency among a group acutely aware of their relative powerlessness. While retailers could not order producers to make changes—Peel Holroyd (2010) recalled that he 'couldn't dictate to anyone'—they were the dominant force.

The reporting of the anecdote from multiple sources suggests that while its humour may well have originated from the unequal power relations, its widespread currency suggests an alternative mechanism for the sensemaking processes undertaken by the poultry producers as they navigated their way through to accepting the new equilibrium in the supply chain. In this sense, the 'micro-emancipation' (Berti & Simpson, 2021) afforded by irony proved increasingly generative over time, helping many geographically and temporally disconnected individuals understand their range of options within a system of structurally limited choices. Historical approaches to zooming in and out, unlike ethnographic or interview-based methods, reveal the ways in which such a process of cognitive acceptance played out over a long period of time. Laughs, jokes and humour suggest that the role of anecdotes like this among peers was a mechanism that facilitated sense-making (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Humour provided momentary relief, but the most frequent mode of acceptance of the paradox was stoicism. John Maunder (2010) accepted that 'it was one of those penalties [of working with Sainsbury's], if you like, that you had to respond to. Andrew Gilliat (2011) remembered:

If anything went wrong... if they failed to make the weight or didn't look right, we had a visitation from Peel Holroyd, and he'd say, 'I don't want these.'

[Interviewer] – And then what did you do?

Well it was no good bursting into tears! You just lie awake worrying about it.... If you could cope with Marks, you could cope with anything.

Peer-to-peer gossip and humour encouraged the growing legitimacy of the new standards among the poultry producers, thus leading to their widespread acceptance (Maunder, 2022). This understanding of the anecdote then permits a different interpretation of the likely process that led to the acceptance of the new state of equilibrium of the emerging paradox among poultry producers, one that is much more focused on the role of sense-making among the poultry producers, and the role of peer-to-peer communications (industry gossip) within that sense-making process. The jokes were the mechanism that permitted the less powerful actors to accept their ever-diminishing autonomy within the emerging food supply system, that then permitted them to continue to remain a part of the network. Their relative losses were the necessary compromises that were required for the paradox at the heart of the system to persist and for these new voluntary food standards to mature and then set the template for those that were to follow.

The emergence of private voluntary standards in the poultry sector in the UK is an example of a paradox. Vertical restraints enabled the poultry industry to respond quickly to consumer concerns about antibiotic use in factory-farmed chicken. Here consumer interests were seemingly prioritised. But given that antibiotic levels in poultry rearing failed to drop, industry interests were also prioritised. Despite this contradiction, a new position of long-term stability emerged, albeit one where the food retailers were now able to exert strict control, in the name of maintaining consumer trust, over producers through the mechanisms of private voluntary standards. These standards grew, increased their reach across all areas of poultry production, and became enormously influential. Retailers extended the system to producers of other food categories in the UK. Their success in the UK then led to them becoming the template for EurepGAP and so, subsequently, for GlobalGAP. Understanding how and why the poultry producers were willing to embrace a system which so dramatically reduced their agency only becomes apparent when researchers adopt historical methods.

Zooming in and out on the historical context of agrifood standards thus addresses a central debate in paradox studies. Advocates of a 'dynamic equilibrium' model of organisational paradox highlight the ability of organisational actors to direct a paradoxical system towards 'virtuous cycles' (Smith & Lewis, 2011). By contrast, proponents of a 'permanent dialectics' model insist on the structural constraints to individual agency, precipitating cycles of intense conflict in systemic change (Smith & Cunha, 2020). Our analysis exposes how the context in which a strategic paradox emerges simultaneously entails elements of structural determinism *and* cognitive malleability (Hahn & Knight, 2021). Organised consumer movements attained unprecedented agency in the 1930s US and 1960s UK to bring significant government intervention to bear on issues of human health and animal welfare. Over the long term, however, subsequent reconfigurations of agrifood standards entrenched existing structural power relationships in the industry. Yet cognitively, consumers—like UK poultry producers—have largely adapted to the shifting *meanings* embedded in the standards: antibiotics as growth promoters remain unacceptable, but antibiotics as medicines are unproblematic. Likewise, American consumers who once demanded government mandates on what food processors could put in their products are now expected to develop trust in a much more competitive food marketplace *via* standardised nutritional labels (Frohlich, 2017). Structural asymmetries remain, even as the cognitive understanding of what food standards *mean* has shifted.

Significant opportunities remain for further exploration of how historical analysis can explain how voluntary standards have produced paradoxical power structures and conflicting meanings in agrifood systems. Existing studies of voluntary agrifood standards generally overlook the long-term contextual richness revealed through historical methods. Ahistorical explanations of why food producers accept the asymmetrical power relationships embedded in standards regimes such as GlobalGAP generally implicate the 'neoliberal' failings of public governance (Baur et al., 2017; Busch, 2011; Foulleux & Loconto, 2017; Fuchs et al., 2011; Halabi & Lin, 2017). Assigning causal force to neoliberalism, however, does not explain why the template for voluntary agrifood standards was established in the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of faith in strong public governance. 'Neoliberalism' does not explain why contemporary multinational agribusiness routinely acknowledge the limits to their power to enforce voluntary agrifood standards (Freidberg, 2017; Shukla & Tiwari,

2017). Nor does it explain why industry-led multistakeholder initiatives for agrifood sustainability have increasingly embraced such paradoxical strategies as the creation of 'pre-competitive spaces', in which the distinctions between collaboration and competition, and between private and public governance, collapse (Clay, 2011; Rueda et al., 2017; SAI Platform, 2022). Historical contextualisation, we contend, can help to make sense of such paradoxes.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, beyond the realm of agrifood standards, two elements highlighted in our case study could help drive further refinement of paradox theory: crisis and humour. Crises in agrifood systems—from antibiotics to *E. coli*—have not only spurred the development of new supply chain standards, but have also exposed paradoxes such as 'industrial organic' agriculture (Guthman, 2004). Although paradox theorists regularly address the role of crises on organisational issues including decision-making and organisational rigidity (Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018; Tabesh & Vera, 2020), the lack of a longitudinal perspective limits our understanding of the generative impacts of crisis. The concept of 'crisis', as historical theorist Koselleck (2006) has shown, is deployed by historians as a marker of epochal transition—'indicat[ing] a critical transition period after which—if not everything, then much—will be different' (p. 371). Exploring the relationship between crises and paradoxes thus begs for historical methods. Likewise, our exploration of the role of humour in navigating organisational paradoxes draws on and contributes to existing paradox studies (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Further research into the ways in which jokes from a distant past continue to resonate in the present could help provide guidance for contemporary organisational actors seeking to make sense of the underlying processes by which broad-scale systemic changes in power relations and dynamic equilibria either do or do not occur. And for business and organisational historians—for whom humour is remarkably understudied—a few more jokes could provide new insights as well!

## Note

1. The interviewees and the companies they represented were: John Maunder (Lloyd Maunder), David Roberts (Chunky Chicks [Nichols] and Marshalls); Andrew Gilliat (Sun Valley); Struan Wiley (Chunky Chicks [Nichols], Ross and Imperial), Brian Cookson (Buxted, Allied Farm Foods, Ross and Imperial), Robert Mayhew (Mayhews), and Peel Holroyd (Marks and Spencer). Interviews took place during 2010 and 2011 (with an earlier exploratory interview with John Maunder in 2005). They were approached after initial desk research. They were given a substantial information pack about the purpose of the research and a list of topics to be covered in the interview. The interviews themselves were semi-structured and typically lasted two to three hours. The original ESRC-funded research project was 'The Diffusion of Intensive Rearing Technologies and Supermarket Interventionism, Britain, Australia and the US since 1945', RES 062-23-1272. 2009-2014. John Maunder was subsequently – in September 2022 – contacted by email as a part of the verification process for this research.

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